

Inclusive Governance, Panchayats and Women's Empowerment : Ideas, Issues and Interventions

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Equitable participation of women in politics and government is essential to the building and sustaining democracy. To quote the lines of the Inter-Parliamentary Union incorporated in the Universal Declaration on Democracy "The achievement of democracy presupposes a genuine partnership between men and women in the conduct of the affairs of society in which they work in equality and complementarily, drawing mutual enrichment from their differences".¹ So, democracy needs the support and service of men as well as women and should be based on a system of inclusive governance.

Inclusive Governance and Empowerment of Women: Ideas

From the perspective of the women, participation of women in the system of governance symbolizes equality and freedom enjoyed by them and the space given to them not only in the decision making body, but the position guaranteed to them in the society. Women's participation in decision making and their inclusion in governance thus is an emblem of a progressive and prosperous society. It is assumed that inclusive governance is the key to inclusive growth and is an instrument for women's empowerment.

Empowering women on one hand involves making them self-dependent, self

confident and independent to the extent where they can assert their rights; and promote their participation in the institutions and processes of the society. The concept of empowerment has swept the world's thinking to strengthen the women resources since the mid 1980s. This was as an alternative strategy to tackle the problems of women's subjugation and segregation by integrating her, giving her due position and identity, power and share in the process of nation building. The tool of empowerment has been accepted as the potent tool for uplifting the plights of women and safeguarding her human rights. Rappaport (1987)² defines empowerment as a process that conveys a psychological sense of personal control or influence and a concern with actual social influence, political power and legal rights. Mc Ardle (1989)³ comments empowerment is a process whereby decisions are made by the people who have to bear the consequences of these decisions. Conger and Kanungo (1980)⁴ observe empowerment as an internal urge for exerting influence and control.

Women in India since long were in a state of disempowerment. They suffered from gender based inequalities. Women belonging to minority communities, marginalized groups, Dalits and tribal groups were doubly disadvantaged in character. It was thought that political

disempowerment of women was the root cause of their economic and social impoverishment and disempowerment. This denied their enjoyment of rights, access to resources and to have a risk free life and a better relational status in the society as human beings.

So far as power is concerned, women have always been outside the margins of political power. Right from the family to the community, their decision making power was always limited and many times absent. On the basis of the observations made by the Committee on the Status of Women in India⁵ and the recommendations of the National Perspective Plan for Women⁶, the Government decided to bring the women into the ambit of the decision making process right from the grass root level. The reservation of seats for women in the Panchayats through the 73rd and 74th amendment acts was the maiden step undertaken by the Government of India towards gender inclusive grass root governance. The 73rd amendment has mandated representation of at least one-third women through election instead of the earlier provision of one or two women nominated by government or co-opted by the predominantly influential, powerful male membership/leadership of these Panchayats. The reservation was made for at least one-third membership and chairpersons' positions in Panchayats at all the three levels. Thus, now all Panchayats, at every level will have at least one-third women members, (they can contest for other seats too), and at least one-third of Panchayats at each level - district to village- will be headed by women chairpersons.

The state of Odisha was one of the pioneering states to implement the provisions and to ensure a space to rural women in political decision making process. This was against the principles of public/ private dichotomy that had long debarred women's inclusion in politics. Today

the inclusion of women in Panchayats has tried to cut across the culture of patriarchy and gender subordination suffered by women. This is giving a real sense to the process of democratic decentralization and gender inclusive governance. Women's inclusion in politics through their participation in the Panchayats has put an end to their yearlong exclusion from power corridors. The reservation and of late the fifty per cent reservation has increased their visibility and opened avenues for echoing their voice in the local decision making bodies. This is a step forward to the process of their empowerment.

The present Panchayati Raj structure of Odisha includes 30 Zilla Parishads with 854 elected Zilla Parishad members, 314 Panchayat Samitis with 6,235 elected Panchayat Samiti members, 6,236 Gram Panchayats including 6,236 elected Sarpanches and 87,551 elected Ward Members out of which 46,643 Women Ward Members constitute the rural local governance system. Thus, in Odisha now there is a total of 1,00,876 elected representatives in the three-tier rural local self governance system out of which 50 per cent women are elected members that signalise gender inclusive governance system in operation⁷.

How far Inclusion is empowering for Women?

No doubt the visibility of women in the Panchayats has increased in manifold levels. The process of inclusion is well reflected from their numbers and presence in the decision making institutions. But the reality negates the avowed purpose of gender inclusion that is empowerment. A stock taking of the functioning and representation of women in the Panchayats bring the following observations to limelight.

At the Panchayat level, women's representation in politics has no doubt become

phenomenal, but the real participation is still lacking. Women till the date are not participating in a meaningful and effective way and their record as decision makers is quite poor. Till date they lack proper knowledge about their expected roles which retard their role performance. Their knowledge about the items on which they can legislate, agenda of the meetings, generation of revenues is very low. This restricts their deliberative and legislative ability as decision makers. Passivity of women in the forum of the decision making body make them disempowered. Thus, mere representation by numbers has not brought much change in their attitude and actions. So the old practice of male dominated, dictated and directed Panchayats continues to exist.

Put into Lester W. Milbrath's⁸ political participation model, in India women's participation in the Panchayats is essentially transitional and not spectatorial or gladiatorial in character. Transitional activities include attending meetings just as members, becoming neutral and alternative listeners, while coming in contact with public officials. Spectator activities give coverage to voting, influencing others to vote and joining a political discussion. Gladiatorial type of participation implies taking stewardship in raising funds, deciding the vision and action plan of the Panchayats. This is a reflection of the actual empowerment of women in the local self governments. But such type of activities is missing with the elected women representatives of the state. So when gender inclusive governance fails to develop influencing and implementing capacity in the women, it can be said to be a failure in the empowerment process of women.

On the basis of their level of involvement, Robert A. Dahl's⁹ fourfold model can be applied. The fourfold model of political participation according to Dahl is political stratum, the power

seekers, the powerful and the apolitical stratum. In case of Panchayat level of participation of women, the scenario is dominated by the apolitical stratum and the other three categories are missing. This indicates that the participation is just at its infancy and lacks maturity. This is more ornamental having no real empowering yield.

So, in the Panchayats over all, we find two groups of women representatives. They are those who have occupied invited space and those who have adorned created space. Majority of women adorn invited space. Due to the compulsion of the provisions of reservation, they are propelled to occupy seats. Mainly, they are directed and dictated by their male counterparts. In this case they do not feel themselves to be empowered rather they become the dictate carriers of their politically suppressed and segregated male family members without any type of initiations and innovations on their part. Those women who have created a space are self propelled, more effective, more public-oriented and delivering and have made their presence felt in the Panchayat. They have contributed towards making the vision of inclusive governance and empowerment realities. But their number is quite meagre.

Political power has not insulated women from facing gender-based violence. A new study conducted by the Centre for Social Research and UN Women has found that gender inclusive governance has made women vulnerable to high levels of violence. The forms of violence do not only include sexual or physical, but also emotional and psychological violence. It was found that India is much worse than Nepal and Pakistan in physical violence (45%), verbal abuse (49%), and threats (45%). Particularly, the women in the Panchayats are more vulnerable to such violence which makes them feel disempowered.

In many occasions political connectivity of the families make Panchayats the citadel of privileged women. So the common woman finds no space in it. This elitist trend is not true inclusion and this cannot empower women as a community.

Issues faced by Women in Inclusive Governance

Issues in gender inclusive governance not only make inclusion of women difficult, but fail to empower them adequately. The common issues that need urgent attention are:

Ideological Factors: Patriarchy as a system of male domination shapes women's relationship in politics. The gender role ideology is used as an ideological tool by patriarchy to place women within the private arena of home as mothers and wives and men in the public sphere. This is one of the vital factors that shape the level of women's inclusion in the system of governance. The domestic space of women prevents providing public political space to them.

Patriarchy shapes society's perception of women that they are vulnerable, in need of male guardianship and unsuited for political life. Patriarchy portrays women as weak, dependent and incapable of making smart decisions. With the constant reinforcement of the notion that women are inferior in every aspect, it becomes hard for women to pursue their political rights as an active participant in the decision making bodies. The patriarchal ideology glamorizes the reproductive and care-giving role of women. It believes women need support from their male counterparts as they are incompetent, indecisive and have inferior intelligence. Gender stereotypes cloud the judgment of the common people of the community and prevent in creating a culture that will promote women's pro active role in governance. This emerges in the studies of several researchers like Mohanty (2002)¹⁰, Satpathy (2002)¹¹, Parida (2010)¹².

Political Factors: The nature of politics is an important factor for the inclusion or exclusion of women. Women are brought into politics as the dictate carriers for their male partners, under the pressure of legislations. Male domination of politics, political parties and political structures is another factor that hinders women's true political participation and empowerment. In a male-dominated political structure and process women become invisible and unheard. Their vision never finds place nor is their voice paid any heed to. Male leadership is easily accepted and female stewardship is systematically avoided. Here inclusion becomes a mere political showcasing. In reality Panchayats remain masculine in character.

Socio-Cultural Factors: The gender status quo is maintained through access to resources, availability of opportunities and differential distribution of power and gender role socialization. Culture of patriarchy, culture of silence are the accepted ideal practices which make women's inclusion ornamental in governance and their empowerment a myth.

Economic Factors: In recent days, grass root politics is increasingly becoming commercialized. Women lack access to and ownership of productive resources, which limits the scope of their political work. Lack of access to capital, credit and technology limits women's effective role in the system of local governance. Without property they feel powerless.

Lack of Social Capital and Political Capacities: Women often lack public contact and networking due to their home confinement which is a basic need of politics. Due to the absence of social capital they lack political skills, proper training and access to information which are needed to manage local politics and to be effective policymakers. This impoverishment makes their

empowerment difficult. Remaining within the fold of the system of governance, they feel disempowered.

Educational factor: Lack of proper education and training defeats the very purpose of gender based inclusion. This increases women's dependency on their male counterparts and fails to invest in them a capacity of choice and to translate that choice into decision and action. This position renders them disempowered.

Interventions Needed to Promote Gender Inclusive Governance and Women's Empowerment a Reality

Gender equality and women's empowerment are not only human rights; they are also imperative for achieving inclusive, equitable and sustainable democracy. It is high time now to eradicate the namesake participation of women which not only denies inclusive governance, but also defeats the very purpose of women empowerment. In order to ensure inclusive governance achieve its purpose, women's inclusion in local politics and empowerment are to be strengthened and made meaningful. There are a range of possible mechanisms by which a quantum leap can be achieved in women's empowerment through inclusive governance. These are:

- The structures, policies, norms, practices and values of political parties which play a decisive role in local governance system need a profound change to impact on the level of women's participation in the system of governance.
- A significant strategy to improve women's participation in decision making is by imparting adequate training to them to develop their skills and gender sensitivity. Confidence building and capacity building are

the twin requirements to accommodate women meaningfully in the system of governance. Knowledge of the Constitution, Panchayat manuals, and legislative procedure is to be gained by women to participate in the system of governance.

- Women's participation need not be measured in terms of number. It is quality, substance and spirit that matters. For this the articulation should be spearheaded through primers, parties, media, and local leaders. Mock Panchayats in schools, women political icons interacting with the budding local women politicians can contribute significantly towards this process.
- Adoption of multipronged strategies to improve women's access to education, employment, health, social security, and other fundamental economic, social and cultural rights can also increase the degree of women's inclusion in local politics and make them really empowered.
- Organization of regular and comprehensive impact assessments of empowerment policies and programmes for women's participation in decision-making bodies can have its impact on the decision making ability of women and can fascinate them to participate in political decision making process.

Tackling gender-based violence also needs to be made a priority within government agendas.

If these interventions can be taken on a long term basis, then women's inclusion in governance will become easy, hassle free, fulfilling in character. A high level of community consciousness, critical thinking in women, collective mobilization and responsibility sharing, cultural transformations and women's conscious

efforts as change makers can make inclusive governance fulfil its vision and empower women successfully.

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